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Ethnography and Ethnology

Introduction:

When choosing a subculture to study, my desire was to investigate something that I have personally been a part of and that I had not analyzed in a critical way before. So I chose to study a concert in Seattle called the Capitol Hill Block Party. It was held on East Pike between Broadway and 12th Avenue, on July 23, 24, and 25. I specifically wanted to examine the people in attendance and their behavior from an outside point of view. Some particular behaviors I was curious about were their purpose for coming to the concert, their interaction with others, and common practices in general at an event such as this.

Methodology:

I actually did not even plan to study the Capitol Hill Block Party until I arrived there on Friday, July 23 with three friends of mine. Upon seeing the vast variety of people in attendance, I decided that it would be the perfect event to investigate. There were all sorts of people there and all were behaving in different and interesting ways. I fit into the picture as just another person who was at the concert along with everyone else I was to be studying. I could interact with people and record down details about behaviors as well as the people involved. I collected data on Friday, July 23rd from 4:00pm to midnight and Saturday, July 24th from 3:00pm to midnight. Now when I say “collected data” I guess I am using the term loosely; the nature of my case study was more geared towards behaviors which in my case did not need exact numbers. It was more a case of glorified ‘people watching’ and analysis. Also I have been to over fifty shows and concerts in my life so it is a setting that I am completely comfortable in and used to. I decided that I was not going to go out of the way to talk to anyone as to not influence the way people acted but if someone talked to me first, obviously I would have a conversation with them and attempt to figure out their motives for being there without directly asking them.

Data Presentation and Analysis:

The data that I collected must be expressed as specific examples of people that I investigated; there were far too many people there to be able to watch everyone and collect statistics but I focused on individuals that represented an idea or behavior that was manifested by many more people. Obviously there are going to be many areas that are going to be unaddressed behavior-wise because I was only one person and there was a really large crowd to observe. However, I took in as much as I was able while still enjoying the music that I came to see.

The first people I observed were two guys to the left of us right in the front of the crowd, dancing in an out of the ordinary manner while everyone else stood still as the second band played. One of them had a beard and a red shirt and the other was wearing a gray shirt and had dark hair and freckles. They had large amounts of energy and were getting very into the band that was playing (for the sake of reference, the band was called Bear in Heaven). One of my first thoughts while observing them was whether or not they were on drugs, not because of their energy but because of their mannerisms and overall demeanor. I could tell very easily by the reaction of the surrounding people, that they were thinking the exact same thing. One girl who was standing behind them, looked at me, shook her head, and laughed. Other people were looking on with strange looks on their face wondering what they were doing. After a few minutes of dancing, I observed the guy in the red shirt lean over to my friend Zach who was standing right next to them and say, “Hey man, you look uncomfortable.” Uncomfortable was the perfect word to describe the atmosphere of the crowd around these two guys; it seemed that all in the vicinity were not ready to accept something new and different. This was an important observation that I made; people are not acceptation of new behaviors when first presented with them. Now I was very surprised as I kept observing “red shirt” and “gray shirt”, that the crazier they got, the more they began to get a ‘following’. The people standing around them began to laugh and look on at them as they danced, screamed, and had a good time. “Gray shirt” turned to someone and said, “We came here to dance!” One of the cameramen for the newspaper even was drawn in by their enthusiasm; he took a few pictures of them to possibly use for the paper and they talked to him for quite a while. Throughout the sets of the next few bands, they messed around with the cameraman by tapping him on the shoulder and trying to knock his hat off. A security guard then came over and told them to stop messing with the photo people, to which “gray shirt” replied by saying, “Hey we’re not trying to cause any trouble, we’re just here to have a good time!” I would say that these two guys represent the portion of the crowd whose motives in coming were to have a good time; those who were there not solely for the music but also for the party-like atmosphere. Many other people that I saw had the very same mentality; they yelled, danced, and had a great time.

The next person I analyzed was a girl drinking a diet coke. She moved her way through the crowd with two guys who she was friends with. When they finally settled on a spot, it was next to me and my three friends. They immediately started introducing themselves and began getting to know each other while I sat back and watched the band that was playing. “Diet coke girl” as my friends called her, was intoxicated (a fact that she brought up near the beginning of their conversation). When she was talking to my friends, one of my friends discovered that they go to the same school so they started talking about that for a few minutes. After the current band finished playing, she moved on and started talking to more people. I believe that she represents those attend events like this for the social aspect and of course to have a good time as well. I saw others (mostly females) who were acting in similar ways, in that they were having a fun time just meeting and talking to people rather than just standing and solely enjoying the music.

Throughout the last hour of the concert, my friends and I were in the very front and were being pushed against the barricade because of how large the crowd had gotten. It was so crowded that we could not even move at all, and at times we couldn’t even get our feet on the ground because we were stuck on someone else. At this point the headlining band was just about to start so the energy was high. The band was taking forever to set up so I began talking to the girl I was standing next to. I found out that she had already seen the band before (MGMT) at the Sasquatch Festival earlier this year and we began to talk about bands we have seen. It was pretty obvious that this girl was at the Capitol Hill Block Party for the music, which was exactly why I was there. Now I have been to all kinds of concerts and small shows in the past four years and I have fit into a few of these different categories as well which is how I could pretty aptly tell each person’s motives.

My particular worldview gave me the expectation going into this study that most people would be there solely for the music but that did not seem to be the case. Many people seemed to be more concerned about drinking and smoking than the music. I expected lots of people to be intoxicated but nowhere near the amount that I ended up seeing. Puffs of smoke were going up everywhere pretty much nonstop and I even saw a few drunk people passing out and having to have security help them because they could barely walk. What I saw at this concert just reinforced a belief that I already had that being intoxicated at a concert is acceptable and is even common behavior. Smoking marijuana was also clearly an accepted activity here as well as demonstrated by the countless people I witnessed. But when it comes to substances other than alcohol or weed, I would say that they are frowned upon by the majority. The two guys who were dancing that I mentioned earlier seemed to be under the influence of some strong illicit substance such as ecstasy and the people who were watching them, seemed a little bit sketched out by it.

Another realization that I had that an outsider who was not familiar with the concert ‘scene’ would quickly realize, is that it is totally acceptable and normal to talk and be open with those around you. It does not matter that you do not know each other; everyone at least has something in common by being at the same event. I cannot even count the number of people my friends and I met at the Capitol Hill Block Party. Another thing that should be noted is that it is a strong community even, I am sure that there were people from different states present but the majority of the crowd was from Seattle and the surrounding areas. Many were there to experience a close community. One example of this that I noticed was how there was an area close to the tents selling merchandise where people were double-dutch jump roping. There was a particular African-American man with an afro who was outstanding at jump roping and he was talking to the people and when it was his turn to go, he had some skilled moves. After watching for a little bit, my friends and I went off and watched a band but when we passed by again about an hour later, the man was still there. One of my friends found out that he was from Capitol Hill and comes every year for the experience. Others we saw that were there for the experience were the people who lived in the buildings that lined the street near the stage. They could have left and stayed somewhere else while the concert was going on but they stayed and many opened their windows, gathered on balconies, or even climbed on the roofs to watch.

Overall, it was a rather enlightening study to do because it helped me see the event (or at least be thinking about it) from a point of view that I had not previously experienced it. I learned to accept everyone no matter their motives for being there. Whether they came to party, enjoy the music, for community bonding, making friends, or all of the above; it does not matter, what matters is respect for each other and the majority of people did a great job with that.